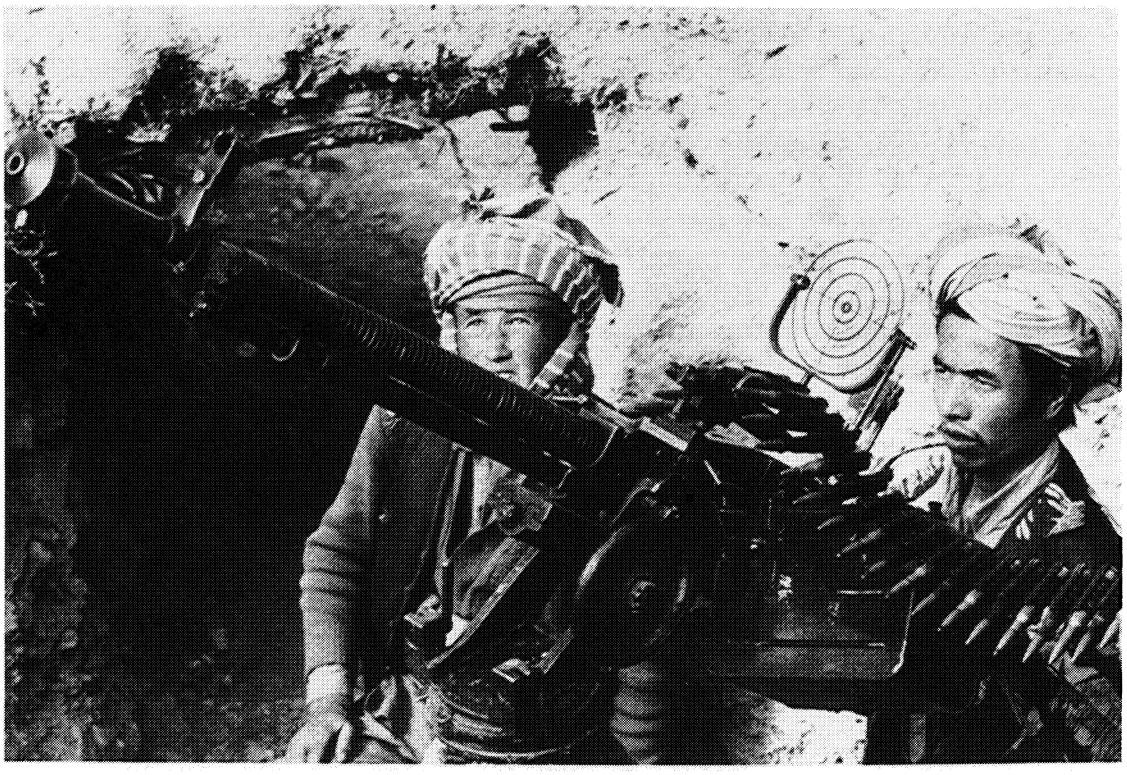


Courtesy of T. A. Davis

Afghan guerrillas in a hilltop position survey the sky for signs of Soviet helicopters

The Su-25 Frogfoot proved effective in attacks against the Mujahideen

setting the stage for follow-on attacks by fighter-bombers, helicopters, or artillery. In 1984, thirty-six Badgers carried out between thirty and forty air strikes daily in the Panjshir Valley.[64] According to some reports, pilots of Soviet fighter-bombers had difficulty at high altitudes and generally operated without forward air controllers. The inability of the planes to attack successfully at night or in adverse weather also proved a liability.[65]

All Soviet aircraft in Afghanistan were under the direct control of the Fortieth Army's headquarters in Kabul, although the operational headquarters for the Soviet Air Force was located in Termez. For reasons of security and maintenance, Soviet medium bombers were based, along with their support facilities, in Termez.[66] Major air bases within Afghanistan existed at Bagram, Mari, Karshi-Khanabad, Herat, Shindand, Farah, Lashkar Gah, Serden Band, Askargh, and Kandahar (see map 11). The Afghan air force included large numbers of older Soviet models: about 45 MiG-21s, 65 to 70 Su-7s, and 90 MiG-17s of 1953 vintage. The most modern Soviet aircraft in the Afghan stable were forty-five Su-22 aircraft of 1971 design. All Afghan pilots were under Soviet operational control.[67]

The appearance of American-made Stingers and British Blowpipes had immediate and serious consequences for Soviet and Afghan aviation. For example, the Tu-16 intermediate bomber and the Su-24, which early in the war were able to deliver their ordnance from relatively low altitudes of 2,000 to 4,000 feet, subsequently had to fly at about 10,000 feet with an attendant decrease in the accuracy of their ordnance. Likewise, Mi-24 and Mi-25 pilots became far less likely to engage in direct combat and, when they did so, resorted to low and fast passes over target areas. Ground support teams regularly engaged in measures to protect incoming and outgoing aircraft, such as launching mortar-fired flares suspended by parachutes. Still, the striking change in the combat environment for Soviet aircraft augured badly for Soviet and DRA ground forces, which now often found themselves denuded of aerial cover. According to a Western account, Stingers prevented aerial resupply to the besieged garrison at Khowst in 1987, thereby forcing a rescue campaign by ground units. During the campaign into Paktia province during the late spring of 1987, Soviet troops, for lack of air support, reportedly abandoned their personnel carriers under attack and dispersed into small units.[68]

Before the introduction of Stingers, some observers speculated that the eighteen steps involved in its firing would prove too complex for untrained guerrillas, but experience demonstrated otherwise.[69] During 1987, Soviet and DRA forces lost from 150 to 200 aircraft, and daylight flights diminished greatly.[70] On the other hand, the Mujahideen may have had difficulty mastering fire discipline with their precious Stingers. A Soviet source indicates that, at least among some groups, failure to bring down at least one aircraft with three Stingers was punishable by death.[71] The Stinger, which proved effective from a considerable distance and travels at mach 2.2 or better, was especially deadly against slow-moving helicopters.[72] The guerrillas enjoyed a further advantage in being able to fire from high altitudes, which afforded a more direct angle of fire on enemy aircraft.

Although Stingers and Blowpipes could hardly be credited with ending the war in Afghanistan (evasion from them was possible, though difficult), they forced an unmistakable reduction in Soviet aerial missions.

Ground Combat

In the course of ground combat in Afghanistan, especially small actions often performed by airborne or air assault forces, the Soviets became reacquainted with long-ignored problems associated with battle in mountainous terrain. Many of the essential principles of mountain combat had been learned by Russian fighters in the Caucasus in the nineteenth century, more recently by Red Army units in Central Asia, and by Soviet units in the Caucasus and Carpathian Mountains during the Great Patriotic War. However, during the first years of the war in Afghanistan, Soviet units in the field displayed little evidence that they had trained extensively for such conditions. At the start of the war, according to Mujahideen Commander Ali Ahmad Jalali, Soviet troops refused to dismount from their mechanized vehicles. They also lacked essential tactical reconnaissance and security skills and were easily ambushed.[73] Masoud observed in a 1983 interview that "Soviet soldiers are not trained very efficiently for mountainous conditions," noting their heavy equipment and slow movement. He was more impressed with the conduct of elite, heliborne units: "They had the courage to face us and the ability to climb mountains quickly . . . but their weakness was that they had not seen war. As soon as they came down and took losses, they evacuated."[74] Facing a tough, elusive adversary who favored ambushes to direct engagements, Soviet soldiers had to learn new skills and tactics.

Offensive combat in the mountains is extremely demanding, both psychologically and physically. A defender, especially one possessing a superior knowledge of the environment, can select his positions, to restrict available avenues of approach and direct fire on them, and remain concealed while awaiting an advancing attacker.

But as Soviet General N. N. Biazi, a successful commander in the Carpathians, observed in a study of mountain operations published shortly after the war, opportunities also await an attacker with the will and method to exploit them:

> Offensive action by small units is favored by a mountain background, with its broken ground, surface gorges, interrupted front line. . . . Such surroundings add force to even a small group of resolute, daring soldiers. . . . The success of an offensive will be assured by observing caution, stealthy movement, by intelligent initiative, a daring plan of action, sudden attack, RELENTLESS DESTRUCTION OF THE ENEMY AND IMMEDIATE CONSOLIDATION OF THE CAPTURED POSITION.[75]

Lieutenant General Gromov himself affirmed in 1989 that the lessons of mountain warfare in the Carpathians and the Caucasus had proved their relevance in Afghanistan.[76] During the Afghan War, the Soviets quickly discovered that only men with thorough preparation could hope to carry

out such demanding actions, and articles on training in the military press soon reflected an emphasis on lessons central to mountain fighting.

Soviet writers readily concluded that mountain operations necessitated the cultivation of certain personal qualities in training, especially for junior and noncommissioned officers. In the tradition of Suvorov's dictum—"hard in training, easy in battle"—the Soviets stressed the virtues of physical fitness. Assorted athletic programs, including activities such as cross-country running, forced marches, running obstacle courses, and weight lifting, soon became standard training. Descriptions of training programs in the Transcaucasus and Central Asian Military Districts, each topographically similar to regions in Afghanistan, suggested numerous refinements. For example, based on the general observation that even well-conditioned soldiers would encounter difficulty in acclimatization in the mountains, soldiers were made to carry abnormally large loads in training. The aim was to produce soldiers better able to function on rugged terrain.[77] An important corollary to fitness was personal hygiene, essential in the prevention of disease in harsh climes, which was also emphasized.[78]

Another often-cited virtue closely linked to fitness was discipline. As Biazi notes, when the legendary Russian General A. V. Suvorov led his forces on their extraordinary passage through the Alps, his men had received no special training but were extremely well disciplined.[79]

Commenting on combat discipline, Soviet correspondent G. Bocharov observes that the difference between a new recruit and a veteran is that the former does not immediately believe—and thus respond to—what he sees and hears. A veteran, in contrast, knows that "in the mountains reaction decides everything." Accordingly, Soviet exercises were often accompanied by realistic combat sounds to minimize possible disorientation when troops went into combat.[80] Soviet literature on training for mountain warfare focused, above all, on "initiative"—a quality evidently in short supply, especially among junior and noncommissioned officers. As many commentators have noted, men and units in the mountains must often fight in dispersed order, and not infrequently, they will find themselves out of communication by virtue of terrain and atmospheric conditions. In such situations, junior and noncommissioned officers must be able to act independently. The execution of flanking or enveloping maneuvers, in the day or night, whether by forces advancing on the ground or in heliborne units, places a high premium on self-reliance. Accordingly, training for airborne and air-assault forces must be especially rigorous. The chief limitation of such units, in the eyes of one resistance observer, was that unlike their guerrilla counterparts, Soviet elite units could only carry on in the field for periods from three to five days without resupply. Even so, the Soviets employed these forces to advantage and maintained up to five air-assault brigades in Afghanistan.[81]

Another problem identified in Soviet training literature was teaching soldiers in Afghanistan to cope with the dynamics of mountain combat. The description of an unsuccessful company maneuver, published in 1981,

A Mujahideen guerrilla sporting a Soviet officer's jacket seized in an ambush

offers a useful perspective on the problem. The account, which does not make specific reference to Afghanistan but nonetheless depicts a scenario characteristic of conditions there, describes a motor-rifle company's encounter with an enemy defensive position in the mountains. In this encounter, the commander directed two of his three platoons to envelop the enemy from behind. However, the attempt failed because their armored personnel carriers could not negotiate the designated routes. In the meantime, the enemy recognized that it faced only a platoon in its front and counterattacked. The writer uses this case to illustrate fundamental principles of mountain combat. First, commanders must avoid stereotypical solutions in making decisions and be prepared for unforeseen developments. Second, in such circumstances, the movement of enveloping units must be concealed from the enemy. The author adds that airborne units could often conduct such an envelopment.[82]

Soviet Lieutenant Colonel A. Shulgin, in an article titled "Battle in the Mountains" (in *Voennyi vestnik* in 1985), warns that the direction of the main attack must always be masked. In addition, coordinated flank attacks, not frontal moves, were the key to advances in mountain warfare. In Afghanistan, the use of smoke was common, and Soviet airborne and air-assault units exhibited an increasing ability to conduct ambushes and night attacks.[83]

Shulgin further emphasizes the crucial importance of skillful reconnaissance and cooperation among the infantry and artillery in the attack.[84] Descriptions of reconnaissance in Afghanistan mention the use of forward detachments or the airlift of units deep into enemy territory to seize passes or dominating heights. Scout units would be charged with the identification of enemy forces and analysis of their dispositions to discover "dead ground" in the terrain or concealed routes of approach. Viewing the same problem from a defensive perspective, Soviet articles on tactics note the importance of establishing observation posts in greater numbers than would ordinarily be required on the European plain. For example, even after the seizure of a commanding height, its approaches could be difficult or impossible to observe from above, thus requiring the extension of posts outward from the heights, in echelons, to permit the observation of all lines of approach.[85]

Biazi reports that Soviet reconnaissance patrols during the Great Patriotic War often consisted of fifteen to twenty men, including a couple of sappers, who advanced in a triangular formation with a pair of two-man patrols at the head and one at the tail. If contact was made with the enemy, they were trained to give battle and then either retreat or infiltrate to the enemy rear. Recent Soviet literature on training for mountain warfare contains references to *obkhodiashchie otriady* (infiltration detachments), whose purpose is to execute a variety of missions in the enemy rear.[86]

Enveloping detachments of company and battalion size were common in Afghanistan. Airmobile units were frequently employed against passes and other tactical objectives. Typically, a combined-arms-reinforced battalion consisting of a motor-rifle battalion, a tank company, artillery, a mortar battery, an air defense company, and an antitank company undertook enveloping missions. Much like Russian columns operating in the Caucasus Mountains a century and a half earlier, the Soviets tailored a march formation to provide security against ambush. A reconnaissance patrol generally operated from fifteen to twenty kilometers in advance of the main force and was followed by a security element two or three kilometers in front of the main force. In such situations, three reinforced battalions could function as a regiment under a brigade command.[87]

In one specific instance near the Kunar River in 1980, a Soviet motor-rifle battalion moved along a ravine into the mountains to a position where a large force of Mujahideen had pinned a government battalion. Mines and obstacles impeded their progress. While sappers worked to clear the road, elements of the battalion attempted to proceed along the slope above the road without forward security. Within moments, they came under enemy fire. The battalion commander then sent a company to seize the nearest commanding height. Though burdened with weighty gear and lacking heavy fire support, the Soviets advanced. The rebels began to withdraw, and the Soviet company followed only to move into a killing zone. Without either an artillery controller or an air liaison, the company was unable to direct fire support. Only when an enveloping detachment attacked the height from the rear a day later did the Mujahideen yield the position.[88] The need for observers and liaisons at company level was one of many

problems addressed as a direct result of the Afghan experience.[89] Motor-rifle companies also received additional firepower, including the AGS-17 grenade launcher, and squads and platoons gained the BG-15 grenade launcher. In addition, small units received improved communications systems and sappers. Even with this infusion of assets, however, the Soviets maintained in instructional literature that a numerical superiority as great as five to one could not assure a successful attack on a mountain strongpoint without a supporting envelopment.[90] As one Soviet military analyst observed in 1987, "Contemporary combined arms subunits, fortified with tanks, artillery, and other means, with the support of aviation, can attack from various directions, combine fire and maneuver, wide and close envelopments, support one another with enveloping detachments, tactical air assault landings . . . in such coordinated actions that the attacker always achieves success in a short time and with minimal losses."[91]

If there is little doubt about the significance of enveloping detachments in the Afghan War, the same is not true of the employment of chemicals. By far the most disputed aspect of Soviet operations in Afghanistan was their widely alleged use of chemical weapons during the early years of the war. Charges that the Soviets used disabling and lethal chemical substances—based predominantly on eyewitness reports of refugees and a few Western journalists, as well as examinations of wounded and dead by visiting physicians—did not gain universal acceptance by either the scientific or journalistic communities because of the lack of irrefutable physical proof. Furthermore, tactical descriptions of the use of such agents were scarce, and there were no reports from the Soviet side, which steadfastly denied all claims. If chemical agents or toxins were, in fact, used, their employment (aside from the incitement of terror) probably served specific tactical aims, such as securing the flanks of Soviet-DRA columns or blocking the movement of guerrillas (in general conformity with the scenario outlined by Pochter a half century before). Reports from Afghanistan also allude to the use of defoliants. Whatever the truth of the matter, reported instances of chemical use diminished greatly by the middle of the war.[92]

A more constant factor, artillery, played the central role in fire suppression against the Mujahideen. Special difficulties attending artillery support of maneuver units in the mountains, such as directing fire on elevated enemy positions, warranted special attention in Soviet training literature. At mountain centers inside the Soviet Union, tankers practiced firing from tilted vehicles, and artillerymen learned the fine points of directing fire up and down slopes. Another solution to achieve elevated fire was the employment of ZU-23 antiaircraft guns on the back of ZIL-235 and other cargo trucks.[93]

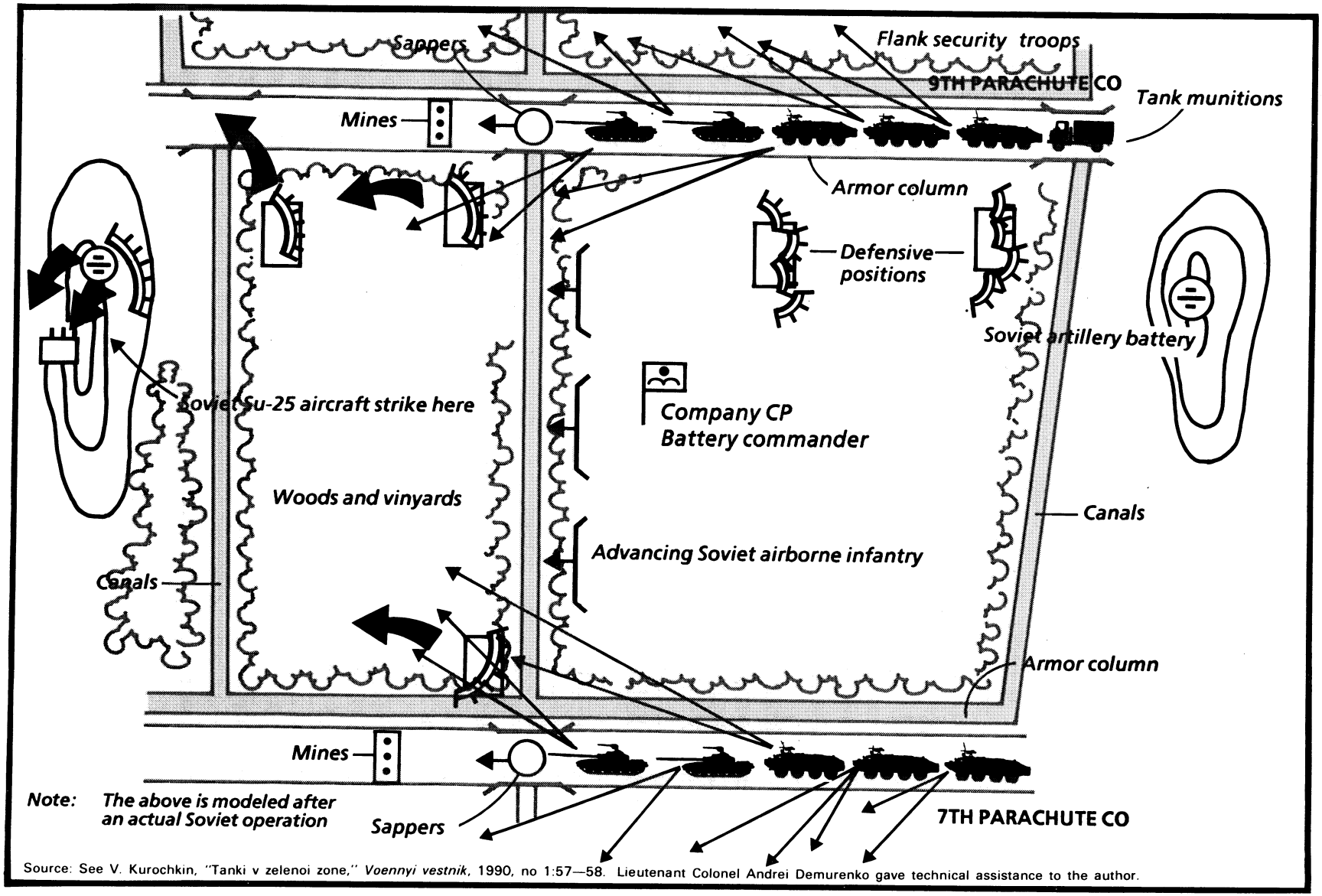
As in the Carpathians during World War II, where the Soviet 1st and 4th Ukrainian Fronts rearmed one 76-mm cannon battery per artillery regiment with 120-mm mortars and some antitank battalions with 107-mm pack howitzers, portability also influenced the Soviets' choice of weapons

in Afghanistan. In Soviet units operating in Afghanistan, mortars ranging from 82-mm to 120-mm formed a key component of fire support and were prized for their ability to hit "dead ground" in the terrain. The Soviet arsenal also included 76-mm mountain howitzers, 240-mm trench mortars, and 220-mm multiple rocket launchers.[94] The Soviets often employed artillery against rebel strongpoints, sometimes in combination with air strikes. Mobile observation posts proved their worth in the direction of artillery fire, as did aircraft. Rolling fire from a range of six to eighteen kilometers frequently preceded a column attack or heliborne insertion. One resistance source asserts that the Soviets became somewhat predictable in this regard, regularly using artillery and aerial bombardment before embarking on an operation. Yet at times, the Soviets confused the resistance by pausing for up to twenty minutes during a barrage, only to resume firing while the Mujahideen were restoring their positions or evacuating wounded. In general, firepower-intensive tactics were impressive, but they often did not achieve an effect commensurate with the lavish expenditures of ordnance. According to one account, from 16 to 18 Soviet guns lobbed from 3,600 to 7,200 shells on a 6-hectare (about 15-acre) area but did relatively little damage because of the wide dispersal of Mujahideen guerrillas.[95]

Well-coordinated firepower proved invaluable not only in the mountains but in areas referred to as "green zones" (irrigated fields and vineyards forming scattered oases across Afghanistan) (see map 12). In green zones, the complex irrigation networks are fed by subterranean passages, often fifteen meters beneath the earth, that stretch up adjoining mountain slopes.[96] Mujahideen guerrillas found such zones particularly advantageous for staging ambushes and returning quickly to cover. Pursuit of guerrillas into the green zones, which were subdivided by intersecting canals and further broken by wooded patches, proved a formidable problem.

As in the mountains, Soviet forces recognized the need to maximize firepower at the lower levels also. For example, for combat in a green zone in Kandahar province, each motor-rifle company received a platoon of 82-mm mortars and each battalion a platoon of 122-mm howitzers.[97]

In May 1984, near the oasis of Fakhdzha, elements of a Soviet parachute battalion were pinned down in a green zone while on a mission to clear a nest of resistance fighters. The battalion commander directed his armored group, in coordination with sappers, artillery, airborne troops, and aviation, to fight its way in. The peril of such an advance was considerable, for the Mujahideen had flooded fields, laid mines, and created secure fire positions manned with grenade launchers to block all approaches. Moving through the checkerboard of interlocking paths and canals, past vineyards and fruit trees, sapper detachments preceded armor columns along parallel routes. Meanwhile, airborne companies moved forward on line, by platoon, to clear the flanks of the advancing armor and ensure that no guerrillas remained in the rear. At the same time, the artillery battery commander directed fire 200 meters ahead of the advance to suppress the enemy and drive them back. Air strikes by two Su-25s also destroyed an enemy obser-



Source: See V. Kurochkin, "Tanki v zelenoi zone," *Voennyi vestnik*, 1990, no 1:57—58. Lieutenant Colonel Andrei Demurenko gave technical assistance to the author.

Map 12. Tactical combat in a green zone

vation post 600 meters forward. The march, slow but inexorable, proceeded at the pace of the sappers. In all, the Soviet combined arms force fought through fifteen ambushes over two days of combat but cleared the green zone, virtually without casualties.[98]

Adherence to sound combat principles, however, hardly assured success or prevented serious setbacks for the Soviet Army in Afghanistan. Writing in *Pravda* in 1982, Rear Admiral T. Gaidar candidly acknowledged the security problem for Soviet and Afghan forces operating against the Mujahideen. Discussing the spring offensive into the Panjshir Valley, he reported that although the operation was planned in secret, DRA units encountered a well-prepared enemy upon reaching the valley. Moreover, much of the population had been evacuated from the combat area, and the Mujahideen had already organized interlocking fields of fire on the route of approach. Correspondent Edward Girardet, who was with Afghan resistance forces in the field at the time, confirmed that they knew of the impending attack and added that guerrillas even managed to stage an assault on the key air base at Bagram before the operation commenced.[99]

Still other difficulties beset the Urgun operation of 1984. Urgun was a government-held outpost in the Paktia Valley that was dominated by the Mujahideen almost throughout the war. In December 1983, approximately 3,000 rebels crossed the frontier from Pakistan and attempted to overrun Urgun. While it was besieged, Soviet relief efforts sputtered because the only suitable road across the region had been heavily mined, as indeed had area airfields necessary for resupply by An-26 or Mi-6 aircraft. Eventually, with Soviet assistance, DRA units drove off the Mujahideen and seized what was reported to be a considerable stash of foreign-made military goods, including 82-mm ammunition from England, 3,383 antitank mines, 1,839 antipersonnel mines, and other assorted munitions.[100] In a similar case, when Soviet and DRA units attempted to break through to the encircled garrison at Khowst in 1987, antigovernment forces occupied all surrounding heights, covered area approaches with heavy machine-gun fire, and succeeded in closing the airfield.[101]

Defense, Movement Security, and Communications

Because Soviet units sometimes found themselves isolated and besieged, the problem of organizing defensive positions in the mountains received instructive commentary in the military press. One training scenario, based explicitly on the experience of an airborne subunit in Afghanistan, shows how a platoon in the mountains might deploy. First, the author cautions, the commander must select positions where there is no chance of a landslide or avalanche. The most desirable sites would be found on isolated heights or cliffs along a pass, where the platoon would establish a circular defense with mutually supporting positions and lay mines on all obvious paths of approach. Only well-trained soldiers possessing elementary engineering skills and entrenching tools could organize such a defense in haste.[102]

As with offensive principles, there is a close correspondence between the lessons of Afghanistan and those derived by the Soviets from mountain combat in the Carpathians during the Great Patriotic War. Biazi, in his accounts, placed special emphasis on the need for discipline and initiative when facing a threat of enemy encirclement: "It must be remembered at all times that an enemy engaged in a flanking movement can easily himself be outflanked, encircled and completely destroyed—and this is what must be aimed at."[103] Despite Soviet training efforts, at least one prominent Afghan resistance commander, Abdul Haq, asserts that defensive combat was an area in which regular Soviet troops were deficient. Haq suggests that the Soviets were so preoccupied with trying to attack that they did not know how to defend and thus reacted poorly to guerrilla initiatives.[104]

The defense of convoy units against ambush—arguably the most venerated tactic in the guerrilla repertoire—posed an enormous security problem. A standard resistance technique, described both in Soviet and Western accounts, was to attack the rear and lead vehicles of a supply or troop column so as to paralyze the column and then chop it into segments. In one such episode in June 1981, guerrillas from the Panjshir blocked a Soviet convoy on the Salang highway and forced the Soviets to destroy most of its 120 trucks, which could not be evacuated with the troops. Similarly, in the summer of 1983, the resistance routed DRA forces that had become bogged down in the mud while driving along a twisting canyon road to relieve Urgun. Writer Jim Graves, who witnessed the action, reports that two battalions of commandos were ambushed near Zhawar. About 3,000 rebels armed with machine guns, AK-47s, rocket propelled grenades, and mortars fired from elevated positions along the column flanks. The DRA column, consisting of about 800 men, 5 T-55 tanks, 12 armored personnel carriers, and 18 trucks, halted after a mine destroyed the lead tank. Heavy rain precluded timely air support, and approximately 300 soldiers perished in the engagement.[105]

The standard Soviet response in such a situation was to have combat vehicles form a shield around the column perimeter. A typical supply column consisted of from 100 to 250 vehicles, of which about 1 in 10 were infantry fighting vehicles. The use of a helicopter escort was also a standard procedure. The rapid coordination of tank and artillery fire, often called in from distant batteries, saved many pinned-down units. It was hardly coincidental that guerrilla snipers targeted communications specialists, and Soviet commanders learned to place their radios in protected positions. One account of the successful defeat of an ambush by a Soviet patrol notes the use of a company of assault troops equipped with bullet-proof vests, large and small machine guns, and grenades. By 1982, Soviet companies frequently included antisniper squads.[106] In order to reduce the vulnerability of units on the road, Soviet engineers commonly cleared the sides of main routes for 200 meters in either direction. And because any delay invited peril, drivers were warned to maintain their vehicles vigilantly, clean their radiators, and be alert to the rapid evaporation of electrolytes at high altitudes.[107]

A greater impediment than the ambush to offensive movement in Afghanistan was the widespread dissemination of mines by the guerrillas. Making use of both homemade devices and large numbers of foreign-manufactured mines, the resistance rendered column movement along any known route a hazardous and ponderously slow exercise. To address this problem, the Soviet Army employed special movement-security detachments, called OODs (*otriad obespecheniia dvizheniia*), consisting of subgroups for reconnaissance, removal of mines and barricades, and road and bridge repair. Depending on the need and the size of the column, security detachments ranged in size from a platoon to a battalion. Such units possessed electronic mine detectors, tanks equipped with rollers, and trained dogs. But they found, all the same, that a meticulously laid mine could elude discovery. Indeed, one Soviet writer insisted with respect to mines encountered in the Panjshir campaign of 1984, "the guiding hand of the professional foreign instructor could be felt." The guerrillas often buried mines in shaped holes, permitting the mine to be driven deeper into the ground by the weight of a roller without detonation, which would not occur until the weight of several or more vehicles in succession had been applied. Likewise, with increasing depth, electronic detection became more difficult, and odors could be disguised to foil canine detection. To further complicate the task, decoy mines were layed that necessarily warranted the same careful attention as the genuine item, thus forcing additional delays. With experience, Soviet soldiers learned to ride on top of their vehicles, rather than inside, when the presence of mines was suspected.[108]

Another persistent problem for the Soviets in Afghanistan was the unreliability of tactical communications in the mountains. The quality of radio communications in the VHF/microwave range varied considerably with the relief of the terrain, and atmospheric conditions at high altitudes befuddled attempts at communication even by practiced operators. Furthermore, motors were less efficient, and the life span of batteries diminished at the higher altitudes.[109] Such problems often imperiled small outposts exposed to sudden attack by resistance fighters, especially on remote peaks or along the Kabul-Khairaton-Salang road. With practice and good topographic maps, signal experts learned to bounce signals off canyon walls and other terrain features. Another solution was the laying of cable between permanent posts short distances apart.[110]

At the strategic level, the Soviets established their command center in Kabul. Satellite links were maintained between Kabul, Termez, and major bases. Still, the nature of the war required heavy reliance on signal units in the field. Signal companies consisted of three platoons, one dedicated to construction and two designated to handle communications. On occasion, Soviet communications specialists were attached to Afghan subunits to improve coordination.[111]

Building the DRA Army and Regime

No dilemma confronting the Soviet Union in Afghanistan proved more politically complex or morally enervating than that of trying to forge a

reliable and self-sustaining army of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. The weakness of Afghan units was apparent well before Soviet intervention, when the 17th Division exhibited a paralysis of will by failing to intercede effectively during the riots in Herat in 1978. In November 1979, with significant numbers of Soviet advisers on the ground and generous air support, the Afghan Army's III Corps campaigned with some success in Paktia but gave no firm indication of an ability to operate on its own.[112] From 1980, the Soviet Army found itself assuming an ever larger portion of the combat burden, while its Afghan counterpart, by all Western appraisals, suffered debilitating defections. Soviet officers directed most of the combat and probably influenced selection to command positions in the Afghan Army as well. Originally estimated at about 80,000 men in size, the Afghan Army saw its strength erode to about 50,000 by December 1979 and by as much as 50 percent more during the following year.[113]

In 1981—82, the DRA issued identity cards to curtail the problem of draft evasion, and a series of conscription laws gradually reduced the minimum service age, while extending the tour of duty from two to three years and raising the age of recall for reservists to thirty-nine. In addition, the government broke a long-standing historical precedent by attempting (without success) to impose conscription on the men of Paktia, who had been exempt, by agreement with the state, for half a century. In 1984, the standard tour of duty lengthened again to four years, and service was made mandatory for any young men who aspired to attend a university. By 1986, effective Afghan Army strength stabilized at about 40,000.[114]

The government also sought to bind the military leadership closer to the party by courting visible Khalq spokesmen for ministerial positions in the government, such as that of interior and defense. By 1985, the government proclaimed that party cells had been established in 86 percent of the army companies and batteries.[115] Equally significant, beginning in 1985, the army recruited an unspecified number of mullahs to tend to the spiritual needs of the troops upon their completion of a special indoctrination course.[116] Continued strife among army factions belied optimistic reports, and incidents of sabotage, such as the destruction of twenty aircraft at Shindand Air Base in 1985, continued. In November 1985, according to the U.S. State Department, four Afghan Army generals were arrested and executed for collaboration with the Mujahideen. The same year, a DRA unit was reported to have mutinied in Kandahar, killed its officers, and defected.[117]

In an attempt to fight fire with fire, the KHAD (the DRA security force, reported to have about 20,000 members) intensified its efforts to penetrate the resistance and, judging from the rebel response, had some success. Resistance commander Amin Wardak asserted in a March 1984 interview that his group would accept only deserters from Wardak province whose identities could be verified.[118] Meanwhile, members of the KHAD were carefully recruited and trained by Soviet experts.

Political conditions in Afghanistan pressed the government to resort to compromise measures in an effort to stabilize manpower levels in the army.

Early in the war, there had been cases of the defection of entire units, such as the 30th Mountain Brigade.[119] Thus, in light of the fragmented and tribalistic character of rural Afghan society, military authorities sanctioned the organization of units on a regional basis in some mountain areas. Adopting a ploy used by the Red Army in the 1920s, the government accepted so-called national regiments, such as the 507th formed in 1987, and included in their ranks many young men who at one time or another had served with the resistance.[120] In 1987, Soviet journalist Artem Borovik acknowledged in the youth-oriented journal *Ogonek* that the local leadership of the new unit extracted conditions from the army before agreeing to serve the DRA. Terms of the deal stipulated that none of the men of the 507th could be conscripted into the regular army, that their arms be provided by the government, and that the unit be charged with the defense of a specific territory. Borovik acknowledged the risks inherent in such arrangements and admitted that in the past some hastily created formations had accepted weapons and then rejoined the resistance at the first convenient opportunity.[121]

The government employed tribal volunteer units to prevent the free movement of guerrillas and their supply trains from Pakistan. The Afghan press made specific references to the creation of such units in Nangarhar province, Badakshan province, and in Paktia. For example, the Ahmadzar tribe in Paktia supposedly raised 1,000 fighters for a 2,500-man regiment to be supported jointly with the men of another tribe. In some instances, the DRA offered payments to tribes such as the Shinwari along the Pakistani border or sought to exploit tribal antagonisms by recruiting a given tribe to curb the activities of a traditionally hostile neighbor. This approach met with some success, especially in the north. Still, sociological shifts caused by the war apparently hampered attempts to organize the tribes. In particular, years of dislocation had undermined the traditional position of tribal chiefs, whose influence had eroded in favor of Islamic leaders of the Jihad.[122] In addition, the regime formed an urban militia, called Defense of the Revolution, consisting of well-paid (by Afghan standards) teenage youths. Urban groups were closely associated with the PDPA and the network of Sovietized governmental and social institutions. Ministry of Interior police, numbering about 30,000, also played a security role.[123]

Yet for all the Kabul regime's efforts in recruitment and indoctrination, a pathological pattern of defections continued to ravage the Afghan Army in 1987. One expedient explanation often raised by the DRA and Soviet press was that DRA soldiers, well-paid by civilian standards, were poorly paid in comparison with resistance mercenaries.[124] If pay was low, however, opportunities for promotion in the Afghan Army beckoned seductively. Soviet journalist Gennadii Bocharov provided an illuminating career profile of Colonel Muhammed Ibragim, who prior to the revolution commanded a platoon with the rank of second lieutenant and then a reconnaissance company. After the establishment of the new regime, he served as the chief of staff for a tank battalion for two years. Ibragim next rose to the positions of battalion commander, chief of the operations section of

Mujahideen warriors directing fire on a government post at Jalalabad

a division, and, finally, brigade commander—all in the span of eight years.[125] *Krasnaia Zvezda* provided a similar account in 1983 of the elevation of a common enlisted man to platoon sergeant and then to lieutenant, although he had no formal military education. Such rapid promotion, the author lamented, "is not exceptional in the current Afghan Army."[126]

Compromises in standards for promotion were matched by concessions in training and discipline. A Soviet journalist reported a minor 1986 incident in which two conscripts refused to obey an order from their lieutenant, and a colonel took it upon himself to persuade them to cooperate! Pressed for an explanation, the colonel acknowledged that such conduct was irregular but added, "we are just creating our army."[127] The lax attitude and divided loyalties of the DRA soldiers were also evident to Western journalists. In 1983, correspondent William Branigan reported spending a night on the trail and receiving breakfast in a DRA militia post.[128] In addition, some Soviet soldiers interviewed by Western writers indicated disdain for the government soldiers. One noted how press coverage of the fighting at Kandahar in 1984 vastly inflated the participation of DRA units, and another described the Afghan Army as "old men and half-wits" who "loafed about at the tail-end during our exercises and hindered us."[129]

As of 1985, the DRA Army comprised 12 divisions, each about 2,000-men strong, as well as a few independent brigades and special units for a rough total of 43,000.[130] This force proved inadequate to maintain control of the handful of major cities and roads that constituted the very foundation of the regime. Estimates of resistance strength varied widely but ranged from about 20,000 to 100,000 full-time fighters, or as many as 250,000 including part-timers.[131] If one further considers the sympathetic support extended by much of the populace, the network expands geometrically. As was evident from the Soviets' decision early in the war to limit the scale of military commitment, strategists must have hoped that air-mobility, superior firepower, and advanced communications systems would enable Soviet and government forces to operate with an effectiveness far surpassing their numerical strength. Reality did not bear out such optimism. The combination of poorly trained infantry units, abysmal operational security, an unreliable Afghan Army, and declining morale constantly undermined Soviet efforts.

The Political and Cultural Dimensions of the War

Although their successes were modest, it was to the Soviets' credit that they eventually grasped the political and cultural aspects of the war in Afghanistan and encouraged the DRA to address them. Recognizing that one of the principal causes of the civil war had been the dogmatic imposition of socialist concepts on a traditional, religious culture in many ways far removed from the twentieth century, the Soviets urged general secretary of the PDPA, Babrak Karmal, and then Dr. Nadjibullah to reach out to elements of the population that were not already unalterably opposed to the regime. The central component of the DRA's attempt to bolster its legitimacy

Courtesy of T. A. Davis

Afghan guerrillas firing rocket propelled grenades and Kalashnikovs on the airport at Jalalabad

Courtesy of Contact Press Images/Jim Sheldon

An Afghan father carries his wounded child, a casualty of the war

and broaden its popular following was the National Reconciliation Campaign proclaimed by Karmal in November 1985 and reaffirmed by his successor in 1986. Though not the first gesture by the government to win over a skeptical populace, the campaign offered for the first time a comprehensive program of concessions and inducements to demonstrate the benefits of cooperation and the good will of the PDPA.

Still, conduct of the war did much to undermine government programs. Military operations too often proceeded with little regard for the civilian populace or its good will. Refugees reported many incidents of looting, firing on civilians, massive aerial bombing, booby trapping, and even occasional executions. Although episodes of this type were never reported officially, the Soviet Army was doubtless aware of the problem and may, on occasion, have acted to police its own conduct. Journalist Francesco Sartori interviewed a former Soviet soldier who claimed one or more Soviet officers had been punished for a mass killing of civilians in an Afghan village.[132] Soviet journalist Borovik later reported a court-martial hearing for a similar offense in Pul-e-khumri.[133] The clearest evidence of the destructive effects of the war, to which the Mujahideen also contributed, was the extraordinary exodus of Afghan peasants to Pakistan, Iran, or even Kabul. In many areas, dis-

affection and dislocation were so great that the government was unable to execute basic functions such as tax collection. At the same time, the Mujahideen often raised their own revenues, sometimes by extorting road tolls from travelers.[134]

Among the first propaganda gestures by the DRA was the amnesty declared in June 1981 which, according to DRA figures, induced about 2,500 resistance fighters to lay down their arms by the fall of 1982.[135] The lack of fanfare in the official press concerning subsequent successes suggests that the achievements of the amnesty campaign were limited at best. Girardet asserted after travels in Afghanistan in 1984 that he encountered from ten to fifteen Afghan Army deserters daily. If this is a reasonable indication, the government probably lost more men than it converted.[136]

In June 1981, the government staged the founding of the National Fatherland Front, an umbrella network designed to reach beyond the ranks of PDPA followers to tribal and regional leaders. Karmal described it as "an authoritative, representative, efficient system of mass political organizations, which will allow us to coordinate and unite together the energy, enthusiasm, and working efforts of all patriots of the country." In addition, the government undertook land reform, construction projects, literacy campaigns, and attempted to promote greater civic equality for women.[137]

Efforts to reorganize Afghan life and rebuild the economy availed the government little. In 1982, the government claimed the initiation of 249 industrial projects and the distribution of land to 300,000 peasant families. However, roughly the same figure on land reform appeared in official announcements as late as 1985. Furthermore, the disruption of normal economic life created shortages and drove prices up sharply in Kabul and elsewhere. Girardet reported in 1982 the doubling of prices in the capital in the span of less than a year.[138]

Another crucial task of the government campaign was to show that the PDPA was not an implacable foe of Islam, a difficult task at best. Accordingly, official radio included in its programming readings from the Koran as well as religious services. In addition, the government restored religious instruction in the schools on the condition that the content was confined to theological matters. In 1987, the Soviet and Afghan governments announced an agreement on the cooperation between their respective official Islamic organizations.[139] By this agreement, the government made its most serious attempt yet to demonstrate its new attitude toward Islam, permitting the operation of twenty separate religious schools and releasing plans for the creation of an Islamic Institute in Kabul. Sorting out this new Soviet policy of embracing religion, Soviet journalist Bocharov commented, "Islam in an Islamic country is not merely a faith, but a way of life."[140]

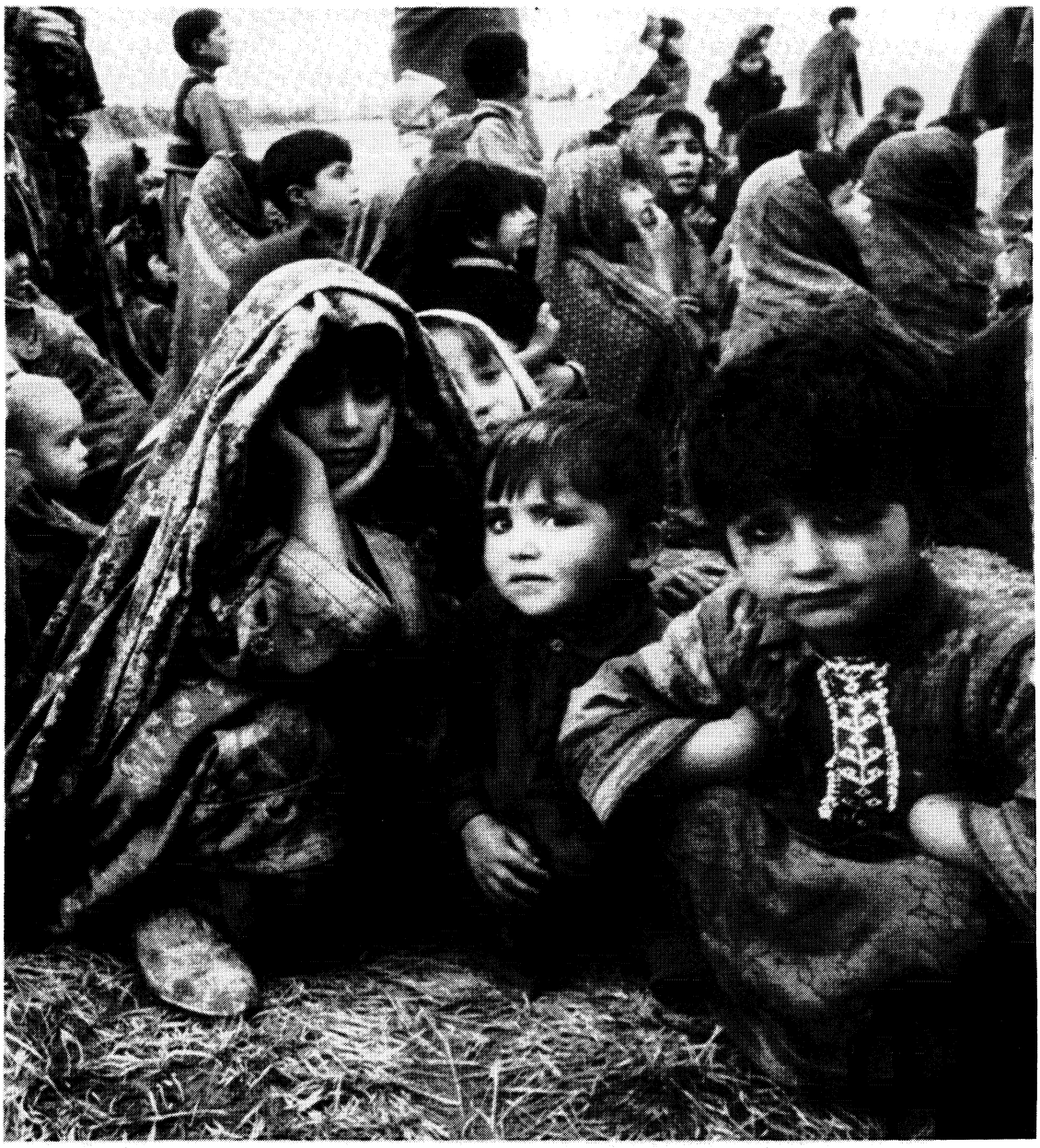
Neither the Soviets nor the DRA were prepared to rely on concessions alone, and early in the war, they embarked on an ambitious program of political education, long a standard element in the building of a Communist government. In 1982, the Kabul regime founded combat-propaganda detachments (*boevye agitatsionnye otriady*) to distribute goods, circulate leaflets,

organize meetings, stage films and concerts, and even offer practical medical tips. Though supposedly engaged in peaceful projects in the countryside, these detachments were prepared to fight when necessary.[141] By the end of 1983, as many as 20,000 young Afghans had traveled to the Soviet Union or other Warsaw Pact states for political indoctrination and schooling. During 1984, the government announced its intent to send several thousand young Afghans, usually between the ages of six and nine, to the USSR for extended periods of training, reportedly as long as ten years. While some of the children were the progeny of party officials, who presumably went with their parents' blessings, or orphans, others were sent off without the consent of their families.[142]

In an attempt to legitimize its rule, the regime in April 1985 convened an assembly in the image of the *loya jirga* (a traditional gathering of local leaders for the purpose of reaching decisions).[143] Though staged with much official fanfare, the meetings had little visible impact, and the general lack of success in winning converts may have been the chief cause of Karmal's removal from office.[144] In an urgent effort to find allies, Nadjibullah subsequently publicized his government's desire to seek out any political groups that might be disposed to compromise, including those of centrist or monarchist political views. As before, the government boasted of remarkable early progress. By 1986, official figures placed membership in the National Fatherland Front at almost a million and membership in the PDPA at 165,000.[145] Later in the year, Nadjibullah, in the same breath, asserted his determination to secure the revolution and made reference to a possible timetable for Soviet withdrawal.[146]

In 1987, Nadjibullah convened another *loya jirga*, which proclaimed a new constitution and renamed the state the Republic of Afghanistan. In January, he declared that representatives of 417 groups (37,000 people) had entered into negotiations with the peoples' regime and cited the effects of new programs for land and water reform. In July, the government reported that 15,000 more rebels had turned in their arms under terms of the new amnesty and reaffirmed its political flexibility: "We are ready to share power with the political opposition and have announced the creation of a multiparty system in the country."[147] Perhaps to reflect this intent, as well as to consolidate his authority, Nadjibullah in 1986 expanded the Central Committee of the PDPA, which by 1988 included not less than six ministers of pre-1978 governments. The composition of local government reflected policy changes as well. The Republic of Afghanistan claimed that over 15 percent of the employees in local organs were former rebels.[148]

The reconciliation drive helped clear the way for the Soviet Union to remove its forces from Afghanistan and, by means of a peculiar twist of reasoning, even served as a justification for the final decision. Soviet journalist Alexander Prokhanov explains it this way: "All this makes it possible to say that the original goals of the DRA were not achieved. They have been renounced by the party itself, by the revolutionary government itself. And that being so, the presence of Soviet troops in the country lost its meaning. Departure is inevitable, logical."[149] What Prokhanov seems to have



Courtesy of Contact Press Images

Afghan refugee children in Pakistan

been saying in circumspect language was that because Afghanistan was not about to accept socialism, the PDPA chose the inevitable path of political reconciliation, a goal that might be better served by the absence of Soviet forces. Preparations for that absence may have included the decision on 24 March 1988 to consolidate two northern Afghan provinces into one, a move viewed by some foreign observers as presaging the administrative and economic assimilation (not annexation) of the district with Soviet Central Asia.[150]

Much official good news accompanied the announcement of a Soviet withdrawal in 1988, notwithstanding the fact that the major resistance

organizations still refused to deal with the Republic of Afghanistan on any terms. *Krasnaia zvezda*, for instance, reported on 22 March that approximately 120,000 refugees had returned to their homeland. It added, however, in a factual note that belied past claims, that this figure exceeded by twenty-five times the number of returnees in all previous years of the war.[151] Furthermore, in light of estimates that 5 million or more Afghans fled their homeland during the war for refuge in Pakistan or Iran, the reported flow of returnees to Afghanistan would still represent but a trickle. Yet many war-weary Afghans undoubtedly welcomed the prospect of a respite.[152]

The continuation of bitter combat in Afghanistan also suggested that official estimates of the situation were too sanguine. Soviet forces remained committed to combat operations throughout 1987. Toward the end of the year, the *Moscow News*—emerging in 1987 as one of the more outspoken and independent Soviet press organs—solicited a comment from a former Soviet commando platoon leader on the results of national reconciliation. He replied, "I honestly don't know. They are showing doushmans on TV laying down their arms, but the number of heavily wounded [Russians] is not decreasing." In a similar vein, an Afghan Army colonel told *Ogonek* that the campaign of national reconciliation was not progressing "as well as we at first calculated."[153] Soviet forces withdrew from provincial garrisons, a few quickly capitulated or were evacuated, but the collapse of the Republic of Afghanistan was not imminent. On the contrary, given its army, security apparatus, fortifications around Kabul, and generous material assistance from the USSR—not to mention the inherent disunity of the opposition—the regime's survival prospects were better than many in the West realized. Until 1992, when Russian material aid ceased and Nadjibullah fled Kabul, the possibility loomed that at least some resistance factions would find a way to coexist with a relatively weak regime stripped of its former ideological character. Even then, many servants of the DRA remained in Kabul to work on the new order.

The Soviet Home Front

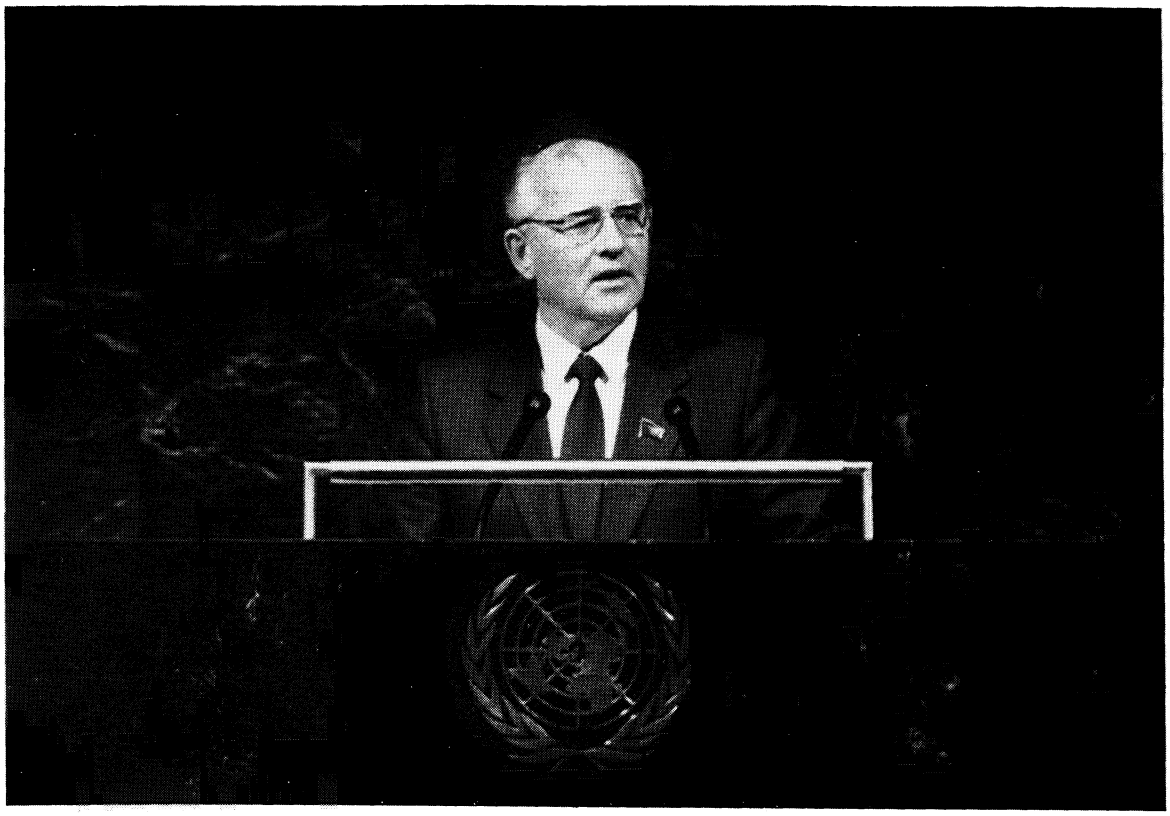
For many years, the view that public opinion in the Soviet Union played no role whatsoever in the conduct of Soviet foreign affairs was almost an article of faith among Western analysts. In fact, even in the aftermath of the Afghan War, it was still difficult to ascribe any tangible influence to popular sentiment, but as the war dragged on, growing numbers of Soviet citizens began to question its purpose. Many veterans of the war returned confused and embittered, confused by the gap between what they were told to expect in Afghanistan—an appreciative citizenry and a clearly defined enemy, including Americans and Chinese at first—and what they found. They were also embittered by what they perceived as a lack of support, even duplicity, by their Afghan allies and, until the very end of the war, a lack of public gratitude at home. While few except steadfast dissidents openly questioned the moral and political merits of the cause in 1980, eight years of mounting casualties—the source of endless speculation due to the denial

of any hard information from the government—and accumulating doubt about the prospects of success gnawed incessantly at public confidence. One obvious manifestation of such sentiment was the determination of many parents to shield their sons from military service in Afghanistan.

During the first years of the war, the state press presented images of Soviet soldiers protecting civilians and engaging in civic projects amidst a grateful Afghan populace committed to saving the fruits of their socialist revolution. The Mujahideen were often depicted as bandits, and comparisons were sometimes drawn to the Basmachis.[154] Only after several years did the press begin to acknowledge the reality that young Soviets were killing and being killed and that the struggle was a hard one. The tone of reporting changed markedly in 1987, reflecting General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* campaign and his frank depiction of the war as "burdensome and painful."[155] Slightly veiled admissions that the war was stalemated, that the Republic of Afghanistan had failed to rally a majority (or even a substantial plurality) of the population to its side, that unpleasant aspects of the war had not been candidly depicted in the media, and that a change of policy was necessary paved the way for an announcement that Soviet forces would be withdrawn before the achievement of a decisive resolution in Afghanistan.[156]

The disgruntlement among Soviet veterans of Afghanistan received much attention in the Soviet press beginning in 1987. By far the most striking and candid commentary was a serialized account in *Ogonek* by Artem Borovik describing the grim nature of the combat and war weariness among Soviet soldiers. Many reports described the use of alcohol and hashish among Soviet soldiers. According to one guerrilla leader in Nangarhar province, "They use alcohol all the time, and if someone gives them a little hashish, they'll give him a Kalashnikov."[157] The widespread feeling among veterans that they had not been welcomed home was especially well documented. In a particularly dramatic instance, *Krasnaia zvezda* published on 22 March 1988 the letter of the father of a veteran who returned to his homeland an invalid, utterly unprepared for an indifferent public reception and calloused treatment by the medical bureaucracy.[158] Another article in a Tajik newspaper suggested that not all veterans felt welcome and that few were admitted to the Communist Party or other responsible positions. Manifestations of official gratitude to Afghanistan veterans, such as memorials, appeared belatedly but not before many veterans protested their plight.[159] Public concern continued to mount over those who had not returned. In 1990, *Izvestiia* reported that about 100 Soviet prisoners remained in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and over 300 soldiers were officially listed as missing. Furthermore, the paper challenged the failure of the government to create an official commission to secure their return.[160]

The war also raised doubts about the fairness of conscription policies in the USSR. On 25 November 1987, *Pravda* printed the letter of a Moscow worker who complained that the sons of officials had avoided service in Afghanistan. Similar allegations appeared in *Krasnaia zvezda* and *Literaturnaia gazeta*.[161] In stark contrast to reports throughout most of the war



Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev reassessed his country's position in Afghanistan and sought international agreements to facilitate its military disengagement

that suggested Soviet youths were proud to perform their "internationalist duty"—the common official euphemism for military service in Afghanistan—letters published in *Sobesednik* pointed out that many young Soviets sought to avoid service in Afghanistan and could not comprehend the mission there. In fact, reports surfaced at the end of the war that Soviet personnel officers had extorted money from parents to guarantee that their sons would not serve in a combat area. In addition, a postwar opinion survey indicated that among the *afgantsy*—soldiers who served in Afghanistan—fully as many, 17 percent, considered their service a "disgrace" as were proud of it. Among the general public, 46 percent viewed such service as a "disgrace," whereas 6 percent found it a source of pride.[162] Equally troublesome to the Soviet government was the possibility that incipient nationalist tendencies emerging in some Central Asian republics of the USSR were related to the war in Afghanistan.[163] Broadcasts from Iran and Pakistan in the native languages of the region, calculated to play upon ethnic and religious sympathies, almost certainly evoked some response. Soviet press reports depicting the Afghan revolution as besieged by U.S. and Chinese mercenaries—though probably accepted at first—now met with skepticism. William Branigan interviewed a former Soviet soldier of Turkoman origin who claimed that even before his own tour of military service began, he knew such reports to be untrue. Having since cast his lot with the Afghan resistance, he said, "I am a Moslem and I am fighting against non-Moslems." Another Soviet soldier from Estonia said the Central Asians tended to "stick

together" and most knew little Russian. Widespread allegations that some Central Asians serving in Afghanistan early in the war proved politically unreliable lend credence to this view.[164]

All problems notwithstanding, it would be wrong to attribute the Soviet decision to pull out of Afghanistan to the effects of public disillusionment. At no time during the war were there large-scale manifestations of organized opposition to Soviet policy. However, the government could hardly fail to notice that support was flagging. Nor did international disapproval, even among Islamic and Third World states, play a decisive role. Rather, in light of General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's commitment to galvanize public support in the pursuit of new national priorities, the Afghan War was an obvious liability.

Conclusion

Perhaps the fundamental Soviet problem in the war was that Afghanistan does not constitute a true nation but in a practical sense can be viewed, in the words of Anthony Arnold, as "25,000 village states."[165] Once it became clear that military action could not compensate for the inability of the DRA or Republic of Afghanistan to win popular support and that it was impractical to build a Soviet-model socialist state in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union had to choose a new course. Such a choice became possible only with the selection of Gorbachev, whose personal prestige as general secretary in 1985 was not tied to the preceding Afghan policy. Only a staggering Soviet military commitment could have forced a cessation of guerrilla resistance, and even then, there would have been no certainty that the Afghanistan government could stand on its own. Thus, continuation of the Soviet presence would necessarily have entailed a continuing, perhaps unmanageable, drain on Soviet resources. In other words, no fully satisfactory Soviet outcome could be achieved on the battlefield alone.

Indeed, the Soviet military presence may have been a liability to the Soviet cause. Soviet journalist A. Bovin, writing in *Izvestiia* in December 1988, admitted as much:

> . . . the overall effect of the presence of Soviet troops and their participation in combat operations clearly proved negative. We ourselves handed the counter-revolutionary forces some powerful means of influencing public perceptions. The foreign intervention stirred patriotism, and the appearance of "infidels" spawned religious intolerance. On such a field, even a tie would have been miraculous.[166]

To the Soviets' credit, once this recognition dawned on them, they were able to reverse their policy.